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AUTHOR Rieu, Le Tai
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses superstitious, folk, traditional, and modern medical practices of Vietnam. Concepts of illness, somatization, behavior labeling, diagnostic attempts, and attitudes toward treatment among Vietnamese are also reviewed. (APM)

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MODERN AND TRADITIONAL MEDICAL PRACTICES

OF VIETNAM

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VIETNAMESE CONCEPTS

OF ILLNESS AND TREATMENT

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Le Tai Rieu, M.C.
INDOCHINESE MENTAL HEALTH PROJECT
INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE
2209 Van Ness Avenue
San Francisco, CA 94109
(415) 673-1720

UD 021 562

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MODERN AND TRADITIONAL MEDICAL PRACTICES

OF VIET-NAM

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I. TRADITIONAL MEDICAL PRACTICES:

Western medicine was introduced in Viet-Nam at the turn of this century. As yet a great number of Vietnamese -- 50% perhaps -- still believe in traditional medical practices in the countryside and in urban areas as well. The reasons for this are:

a) Western medicine ignores the two opposite and complementary principles YANG and YIN that govern the Universe and it does not take into account the five constituents of all things: Metal, Wood, Water, Fire, and Earth.

b) Designed for the big and strong Westerners, western medicine is too powerful for the weak Asian body constitution. It is also believed to be fast acting but short lasting.

c) Western physical examination offends the modesty of the Asian patients.

d) Finally, because of the low ratio $\frac{\text{Doctors}}{\text{Population}}$ western medicine is not always available, particularly in remote areas.

Therefore, many Vietnamese still seek relief in ancient medical practices. These can be grouped in 3 categories:

1. Superstitious practices
2. Folk-medicine practices
3. Traditional medicine

1. Superstitious Practices:

Besides creatures of blood and flesh, this world is inhabited by gods, spirits, wandering souls of the dead that, for one reason or another, can neither reach the Nirvana nor resume the cycle of reincarnation.

Those invisible powers can get mad at you and cause you to become sick. Several deities have even been identified as responsible for the common cold. If I have a fever, backpain and cough, I probably have run into "Ong Cum" and "Ba Co" and they somehow didn't like it.

Preventively, it is wise to have the spirits on your side which is accomplished by presenting them with offerings and prayers at the appropriate time.

If you get sick anyway, elaborate rituals may be necessary for recovery.

Special mention should be made regarding mental illnesses. These are believed to be caused by malevolent spirits and a sorcerer is needed to carry out exorcism which does not, however, forbid seeking western psychiatric care.

Apart from spirits, another cause of human miseries is the lack of "Am Duc". "Am Duc" is the amount of goodness that a person and his/her ancestors have accumulated during their lives. If one's "Am Duc" is low, his family members may have frequent accidents of all kinds; they may particularly present congenital malformations. In these cases, the only hope for improvement is to devote oneself to good behavior and religious piety.

2 Folk Medicine Practices:

Eventhough compliance with the spirits' will is important, folk-medicine can greatly help with the healing process.

Every man and woman knows a number of symptoms and their special remedies that have been transmitted unquestioned from generation to generation.

For example, if one wakes up in the morning with half of his face paralyzed, he has been struck by the "bad wind". If he presents vesicles over a rash, he has been bit by a centipede, etc...

Folk medicine treats scrofula with lizards which are to be swallowed alive. A circle drawn with limestone around a dog bite will prevent rabies from developing. Fried spiders administered to a child will cure enuresis. But the most wide-spread popular practice is "rubbing off the (bad) wind". It consists, after first cleaning the area of the body with alcohol, of rubbing the forehead, neck, back or chest vigorously and insistently with a spoon, or even better with ginger or a kind of balm and coins and hair wrapped in a piece of linen until ecchymoses appear. This is supposed to cure flu, herpes zoster, intercostal neurotis, in short, all sicknesses with a sudden onset.

Sometimes, a special diet is sufficient to bring about recovery. For instance, in case of flu, the patient should eat vermicella and roasted rice paper with shrimp sauce.

As a matter of fact, one must watch his diet in order to stay in good health. Food stuffs are grossly divided in two groups: the hot ones and the cold ones. Hot food will better suit people who are predominantly Yin, whereas cold food will benefit Yang persons.

3. Traditional Medicine:

Actually, the concepts of Yang and Yin borrowed from Lao Tzu's philosophical system are the key principles in traditional medicine. Males are Yang, females are Yin, but in every man there is a trace of Yin principle; and conversely, every woman carries a tiny amount of Yang principle.

In addition, each of us is made up of five elements: metal, wood, water, fire and earth.

Health depends on the balance between the two principles and the interaction between the five elements.

The practitioner of traditional medicine usually has inherited his shop from his father. He is supposed to know Chinese characters and read textbooks written centuries ago on medical art as well as philosophy and astrology.

His only means of diagnosis is to take the pulse, on both right and left wrists. He distinguishes up to 9 points along the radial artery, each of which corresponds to a particular internal organ: lungs, liver, spleen, womb, etc... By the rhythm and the amplitude of the pulse, he knows what is wrong and where; he can also tell what the prominent constituent of the patient's body is: metal, wood, water, fire or earth, and he prescribes accordingly.

Normally, he provides the medicines that he has prescribed, for he is an apothecary too. His shop is supplied with dried herbs, plants, peels, roots and barks, but also such unusual ingredients as bear gall bladder, deer or rhinoceros horn...

The drug, cut in thin slices, are taken in decoction.

Some practitioners sell pills and ointments ready for use,

and the formula for these is a jealously kept secret within the family.

Practice of the so-called traditional medicine does not require formal academic learning, hospital training or ethics, and no license is needed. Anyone can run a traditional drug shop and provide health care under the banner of traditional medicine. One can be prosecuted for the illegal practice of medicine only if he makes use of any scientific method or instrument without a required diploma.

In view of this, it is no wonder that often it is too late when, after trying traditional practices, the patient eventually decides to try modern medicine.

II. MODERN MEDICAL PRACTICES:

Medical care in Vietnam is provided in hospitals and private offices.

Most of the hospitals are government owned. Doctors and nurses who work in hospitals are civil servants and earn monthly salaries. Until the 60's, to avoid abuses and conflict of interest, they were not allowed to have a private clientele.

Hospitalization is absolutely free for the poor. But because hospitals are usually crowded and the facilities are lacking, people come to the hospitals only when special methods of treatment or equipments are needed. Otherwise, the patient prefers to see a private physician.

Whether the option is a hospital or a private office, the patient usually does not have to make an appointment before coming. He expects the doctor to examine him carefully, spending at least

20 - 30 minutes in auscultation, palpation, percussion. He also expects to be given a prescription right after the physical examination. He is reluctant to go for laboratory tests which he can hardly afford and which may make him doubt the physician's capability. However, basically he is trustful and rarely questions his doctor's decisions or shifts to another physician. And it is not uncommon that a general practitioner takes care of three successive generations and becomes the confidant, the advisor to all family members.

In most instances, the doctor does deserve the respect and confidence of the patient; he is dedicated to good. He does not spare his labor and his time. He is not preoccupied by money, and he always seeks to give his relationship with the patient a human quality.

Le Tai Rieu, M.D.

INDOCHINESE MENTAL HEALTH PROJECT
2209 Van Ness Avenue
San Francisco, CA 94109

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VIETNAMESE CONCEPTS

OF ILLNESS & TREATMENT

The Vietnamese patients frequently describe their problems in terms of physical symptoms, even if the underlying problems are emotional in nature.

I have tried to elicit some Vietnamese names of symptoms and parallel them with Western terminology or morbid entities.

I. SOMATIZATION

1. Tức ngực (tight chest) = Anxiety - Fear
   Ngộp thở (short of breath) (with inhibitory feature)
2. Nhức đầu (headache) = Getting upset
3. Nóng ruột (hot intestine) = Restlessness - Being under
   Nóng gan (hot liver) stress
4. Yếu tim (weak heart) = Apprehension - Neurasthenia
5. Thận xuy (weak kidney) = Sexual impotence - Decrease in sexual drive. Depression
6. Bải hoải (numbness, tiredness) = Langor

II. BEHAVIOR LABELING

1. Lẩm cẩm (confused state) = Involutional melancholia
2. Đồng bóng = a. Inconsistency - Ambivalence
   b. Shaman

   Some mediums are devoted to one single God
   Others can invoke any God the client wants.
   By performing the rituals, the medium makes the God's spirit enter his/her body. He/she can then answer the client's questions about the causes of his present misfortune and the way to cope with it.

3. Bùa, ngải (magic) = a. Casting a spell; cursing
   b. Strange behavior, anti-social behavior
   c. Delusion - Thought disorder
4. Động mồ mả (gravesite hit) = Moral breakdown - Bad behavior
5. Ma lãm (possessed by evil spirits) = Schizophrenia
6. Drugs Addiction
   a. Alcohol
      - Alcoholism is considered as either a bad habit or a disease
      - However, social drinking is sometimes encouraged:

"Nam vô tửu như kỹ vô phong": a man who cannot stand alcohol is like a flag that is not blown by wind. And drinking also is a sign of intellectualism: uống rượu, làm thơ (drinking alcohol and composing poetry are two attributes of the scholar).

b. Opium

Generally condemned, except when used as medicine against stomachache, asthma, malaria etc...

III. DIAGNOSIS ATTEMPTS

1. Tử vi (Drawing horoscope)

Depending on the time, day, month and year of birth, one's life is governed by the interplay between specific stars. A wise man can calculate the cyclic changes resulting from that interplay and foresee the predetermined fate of each person in regard of health, wealth, familial life, social achievements etc...

2. Xem tướng (Physiognomy)

It is based on the theory that there is a close correlation between body and mind, thus enabling one to read your character, behavior pattern and life adjustment by examining your physical features (Tseng Wen-Shing)

3. Xem bói (Fortune telling)

In Vietnam, the fortune-teller is usually blind. After lighting some incense sticks and saying incantations, he/she tosses two copper coins onto a china saucer. By listening to the sound of the coins dropping in the saucer, he/she can tell what has disturbed the normal cycle of change and the principle of balance and harmony. He/she also gives advice on how to correct the disturbance.

4. Xin quẻ (Divination)

Throughout the country, there are temples dedicated to national heroes. Near the altar, on a low table, are placed a tin can of numbered bamboo sticks and a pile of poems also numbered. The believer who comes to worship and wants a divine instruction for solving his problems picks up one bamboo stick at random; then takes out the poem with the corresponding number. A literate man helps him interpret the message sent by the God.

Many Vietnamese, even the well educated ones, believe in Physiognomy, Horoscope, Fortune-telling, or Divination.

These practices provide them with acceptable explanations to their problems and thus alleviate their anxiety.

IV. TREATMENT

Whether the patient suffers from physical sickness or mental illness, little blame is placed on him. He is considered as a person who needs to be taken care of by all family members.

However, he almost never takes advantage of his sick role, and does not look for any secondary gain.

Furthermore, he is eager to recover and, because of the concept of organ-pathology, he always expects to be given some kind of medicine that will restore the Yin-Yang balance and the Hot-Cold equilibrium inside his body.

In effect, harmony is for the Vietnamese an important notion. Influenced by Taoist philosophy, the Vietnamese emphasizes "compliance and regulation, rather than conquest and mastery, as the means for obtaining a condition of normality" (Tsen Wen Shing). Imbued of Confucian ethics, he tends to repress his personal feelings, particularly hostility, or aggression, or sexual desire; he values family relationships and parental authority; and in crisis situation "he is ready to accept any outcome with equanimity". As a result, he is likely to reject any means of solving problems which implies destruction of family ties such as youth rebellion, generation conflicts, divorce etc...

When dealing with Vietnamese patients, the modern psychotherapist might keep in mind those cultural aspects so that his work can be more appropriate and meaningful.

Dr. Le Tai Rieu

LTR/hp